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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SANAA 001618

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NEA/ARP AMACDONALD AND INR SMOFFAT

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TAGS: [MCAP](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [YM](#)
SUBJECT: SA'ADA WAR: FIERCE FIGHTING FOLLOWS ALLEGED
CEASEFIRE

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. After a fleeting - or, by some accounts, non-existent -- ceasefire, fighting continues in earnest with artillery and aerial attacks throughout Sa'ada and parts of Amran governorates. Although President Saleh announced a "new" strategy on August 26, little appears to have changed, as the ROYG continues aerial bombardments on population centers. While both the Houthis and the ROYG have scored small victories, the ROYG's indiscriminate air campaign and reported loss of weapons to the Houthis is reducing its advantage over the rebels. Sa'ada City remains under siege, with severe shortages of food, diesel, and other supplies; residents are trapped, unable to flee because of blocked roads and fighting in neighboring regions. Credible sources report that child soldiers are employed by both sides. As long as neither party appears willing to negotiate a settlement, a humanitarian corridor to allow aid in and IDPs out of Sa'ada is urgently needed. END SUMMARY.

"SERIOUS BATTLES" RAGE ON

12. (C) On the afternoon of August 26, various media reported that a brief humanitarian ceasefire had been reached to allow for the delivery of aid; UPI reported that it was set to begin at sunset that day. Relief workers, however, including the UNHCR Representative for Yemen, denied that the ceasefire ever existed. On the evening of August 26, President Saleh vowed to rid Sa'ada of rebels in the coming weeks, announcing that "we will adopt a new strategy to crack down on rebellion and sabotage." Heavy fighting continued and, according to observers, the conflict has now become a prolonged war of attrition. World Food Program (WFP) Chief Gian Carlo Cirri described the situation in Sa'ada City as "extremely volatile," and said that there were reports of fighting in the streets.

13. (C) Sa'ada City and Malaheet (Sa'ada governorate) and Harf Sufyan (Amran governorate) continue to be among the most intense areas of fighting. Presidential Advisor for Sa'ada Affairs Mohammed Azzan told PolOff on August 30 that "there are very serious battles going on and a lot of killings," though there are no reliable casualty rates. There are reports that Houthis are evicting civilians from their homes in order to use the buildings as defensive positions. (Note: An agricultural extension agent in Sa'ada City funded by USAID was evicted from his home by the Houthis on August 26. End Note.) Since the Houthis have come down from the mountains and are based in population centers, Azzan said that the military is attempting to target places from which the Houthis are firing artillery, but in a random, indiscriminate way. The Houthis continue to block the roads entering Sa'ada so that military reinforcements, munitions, and equipment cannot reach the battlefield.

ROYG'S MIS-FIRED STRATEGY

¶4. (C) According to Azzan, "It's too early to say who's winning. More than any other time, the Houthis have suffered hard hits. But the government has made many mistakes, with its random and arbitrary air strikes." He believes the military has two major problems. "The government's randomized response is inciting the population against it and displacing many," he said. Now, whenever villagers see Houthis coming with their weapons, they know that the army will counter-attack, so they flee "in anticipation" of the ROYG's response. The second problem is the huge amounts of military weaponry captured by the Houthis. Azzan said Houthis have seized heavy weapons, such as anti-aircraft guns, and are using them against the government. Various websites have published videos of army trucks laden with weapons that were seized by the Houthis; Houthi media outlet al-Minbar reported that Houthis destroyed armored vehicles and tanks. Al-Jazeera footage aired in late August even showed the Houthis in possession of ROYG tanks, ostensibly abandoned by troops during battles. AP reported that Houthis claimed to have captured a key military post, including its weapons and munitions, in Malaheet in western Sa'ada governorate; the ROYG denies this. Azzan reported that the army is destroying Houthi weapons wherever it finds them. (Note: Various media have also reported the army's destruction of Houthi weapons. End Note.) As a result, the government's two main priorities at the moment are: 1) opening the roads to allow the passage of military supplies and reinforcements, and 2) destroying Houthi weapons caches.

¶5. (C) The total number of Houthi fighters is unknown.

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PolOffs have heard as few as 5,000 and as many as 100,000. (Comment: The latter estimate seems wildly inflated, as the entire population of Sa'ada governorate is approximately 750,000. End Comment.) Azzan affirmed, however, that "the number of Houthis is growing all the time, because people see that the government is retreating and they want to be on the winning side." One change in strategy)- wider use of the Yemeni Special Operations Forces (YSOF) and Republican Guard than in the past)- may make a difference because these forces are better trained and more professional than Northwest Regional Commander Major General Ali Muhsen al-Ahmar's First Armored Brigade, which had previously led the charge in Sa'ada.

SA'ADA UNDER SIEGE, IDPs "TRAPPED"

¶6. (C) The WFP's Cirri said that there has been no water or electricity in Sa'ada City for two weeks. Markets are deserted, and people cannot get supplies. Azzan told PolOff on August 30 that his home in Sa'ada City, which is sheltering 40 people, was hit by a rocket on August 28. The house next door, which has five rooms, is sheltering five large families. People are sleeping in stairways; they spend all day in the crowded house, unable to go to the market or the mosque during Islam's holiest month. Azzan wants to bring his family to safety in Sana'a, but the main roads are closed, and the route east through the desert terrain of al-Jawf governorate is long, costly, and dangerous, due to tribes and banditry. UNHCR Representative Claire Bourgeois confirmed that Sa'ada City residents are trapped, with no good options for escape. She said that people are paying up to \$500 to rent cars to go out through the eastern route, in spite of the dangers. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN moved all its personnel out of Sa'ada on August 27; of the relief organizations formerly in the region, only Islamic Relief, ICRC, and Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) remain.

¶7. (C) Relief organizations estimate the current internally displaced person (IDP) population to be 150,000; many of these people are now displaced for the second or third time

since the conflict began in 2004. Bourgeois said that the WFP was distributing food aid to 98,000 registered IDPs before the sixth war broke out, so the estimate of 150,000 total IDPs)- about one-fifth the population of Sa'ada governorate -- seems realistic. Many IDPs are sheltering with relatives in the region, which makes it even more difficult to estimate their numbers and meet their needs, according to Bourgeois.

18. (C) There are currently four IDP camps)- three in Sa'ada (from previous conflicts) and one in al-Mizraq (Hajja governorate). Press reports about other new camps are inaccurate because their proposed locations are under negotiation and change frequently. IDPs are also assembling in Baqim, on the Saudi border, but there is no established camp as yet, and the UN struggles to bring supplies to the area. Andres Romero, MSF Head of Mission, said that rather than cluster in camps, IDPs "try to scatter in order to protect themselves." Bourgeois confirmed this, and said that the UNHCR prefers to establish smaller settlements of approximately 100 displaced families) rather than thousands of IDPs - which "is a little more costly, but a big improvement in quality of life."

MEDICAL NEEDS

19. (C) MSF's Romero told PolOff on August 30 that his organization continues to operate two hospitals in Sa'ada governorate: al-Tal Hospital, about 20 minutes north of Sa'ada City, and Razih Hospital, at the western edge of the governorate. Since the Sixth War began on August 11, 63 people have been admitted to al-Tal Hospital for emergency medical care, including 36 war-wounded. Between January and July, MSF teams performed 30,000 consultations in Sa'ada, including 720 surgeries, some 100 of them related to war injuries. The two MSF hospitals have had to curtail outreach activities to support 10 health units in more remote parts of the governorate. "It was too dangerous," said Romero. Many of the villages they were visiting up to three times a week, including Majz, Qatabir, Dhayan, and Yesnem, near the Saudi border, were bombed as recently as August 29. MSF teams have evaluated the needs in the villages of Baqim and Yesnem, and teams are providing health care and medical supplies. They have started supplying water to the local population, and will soon distribute food and non-food items.

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UN FLASH APPEAL

110. (C) On August 29, the UN announced a new flash appeal for Sa'ada, which aims to raise \$21.5 million before the end of 2009. USAID has announced \$2.5 million worth of food assistance to the WFP, targeted specifically to ameliorating the suffering in Sa'ada. The WFP's Cirri said that the ROYG has welcomed the appeal and promised its assistance in delivering aid to the affected population.

CHILD SOLDIERS FIGHT ON ALL SIDES

111. (C) On August 30, government media reported that the Houthis were forcibly recruiting child soldiers, claiming that the army detained 35 teenagers who were told by the Houthis that their homes would be destroyed if they refused to fight. Azzan confirmed that there are child soldiers among the Houthis, but pointed out that the government is also recruiting "youngsters from tribes" for its "popular army." NDI Deputy Director Murad Zafir told PolOff on August 30 that children enter the "economy of war" for two reasons: as war orphans who want to avenge their parents' deaths, or for the livelihood a soldier's wages offer. Zafir also claimed that the ROYG recruits unemployed teenagers from the southern governorates, offering them 100,000 riyals

(approximately \$500) as a signing bonus. "They barely know how to use a gun, and they're given a uniform and three days of training and sent to the war." These southern recruits are used as cannon fodder, according to Zafir, and they are one of the reasons for the army's high desertion rate and the Houthis' easy capture of military weapons.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Last week's false alarm regarding a humanitarian ceasefire, and the continued intensity of fighting, suggest that neither side is prepared to give any ground. In this scenario, the only certainty is that civilian casualties -- and the number of IDPs -- will continue to grow. Post and other donor countries will continue to advocate strongly for the ROYG to open up a humanitarian corridor into Sa'ada, in order to allow relief convoys in and civilians fleeing the fighting out, and for the Houthis to permit it to function.
END COMMENT.
SECHE